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SIPDIS

STATE PASS TO US COMMISSION FOR INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: USCIRF VISIT

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SUMMARY  
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11. The ten-day USCIRF visit to Nigeria provided an in-depth opportunity to discuss many perspectives on intercommunal conflicts in Nigeria and the impact of Shari'a implementation on minorities in the northern part of the country. The delegation traveled extensively, finding in many instances, that religion was being used as a mobilizing tool for economic and political purposes and issues. Citing the Inter-Faith Mediation Council in Kaduna as an example of the possibility for dialogue, they advocated continued outreach efforts to lessen historical friction between the varied communities in Nigeria. END SUMMARY.

12. David Dettoni and Dwight Bashir from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) arrived in Abuja August 4. After one day of meetings in Abuja, they journeyed north. Their goal was to meet as many people as possible who could shed light on the past several years' intercommunal violence and its seeming link to religion. They traveled to Jos in Plateau State, Kaduna and Zaria in Kaduna State, Gusau in Zamfara State, and Kano in Kano State. From Kano they flew to Lagos in the south for meetings, then returned to Abuja for a final day.

13. The CIRF delegation and Poloffs met with a wide variety of interlocutors: Federal and State officials, religious leaders of several faiths, human rights NGOs and lawyers, and academics. Highlights of the trip included meetings with the Inter-Faith Mediation Center in Kaduna, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja John Onyeikan, Solicitor General Ayua of the Federal Ministry of Justice, Governor Ahmed Sani of Zamfara State and the Ulema Council in Kano.

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POLITICAL EXPLOITATION OF RELIGION  
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14. The delegation asked virtually all interlocutors about religion's role in the country's continuing ethnic violence. The answer invariably was that religion was merely an effective catalyst for mobilizing partisans for political and economic purposes. All commented that more than forty percent unemployment country-wide has produced masses of people literally sitting idle. Gabriel Makan, Special Advisor to Plateau State Governor Dariye commented that when an event occurs, such as the stabbing in Adamawa State in July, hundreds of people are present at the scene to respond in favor of one side or the other. When it is to the advantage of politicians to encourage or allow demonstrations or riots to take place, such as the Miss World contest riots in 2002, a small event can quickly get out of hand, resulting in dozens, if not hundreds, of deaths. Both Christians and Muslims in Kaduna state cited that example.

15. Another aspect of the problem is exploitation within each community. Nigeria has a very dynamic religious population, and extremists challenge more moderate leaders as being insufficiently zealous for their religion. Many moderates, especially Northern Muslims, fear being labeled as irreligious, and their not speaking out allows more extreme leaders to promote violence and discord unopposed.

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ONE RESPONSE: INTERFAITH DIALOGUE  
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16. As a means to reduce the abuse of religion for such purposes, the delegation was extremely interested in

dialogue between different groups, especially between Muslims and Christians, and asked their Nigerian interlocutors how dialogue can be improved. The team was pleased with the efforts of the Inter-Faith Mediation Center in Kaduna to resolve disputes through dialogue and with the group's level of commitment to preventing conflict. However, the admission by both Christians and Muslims that activists still received training in violent responses to provocations and that there were "many topics" the two sides refuse to discuss due to continuing distrust within the organization tempered the teams positive assessment.

17. The Inter-Faith Mediation Center was founded by a priest and an imam personally affected by the religious violence from the Shari'a Riots in 2000. The priest lost an arm and the imam lost his brother in the conflict. In the last three years, this organization, funded by USAID and other international donors, has worked to promote dialogue instead of violence in Kaduna and claims good results. It has not, however, been replicated outside of Kaduna.

18. The (Muslim) Council of Ulema in Kano, on the other hand, made it very clear they were not interested in dialogue with Christians there. This was confirmed by Christian organizations in the city who reported that all efforts to resolve disputes had been rebuffed by the Council. Christian groups in Zamfara and Kano states told the delegation that "violence (in general) is a fact of life here," however, and violence from the Muslim community was not something they worry about on a daily basis. In many cases, minority communities live in compounds or enclaves, separating themselves from the majority group. The primary concern of these minorities is discrimination affecting their economic prospects and their ability to subsist as a community, not incidents of violence.

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SHARI'A  
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19. The delegation also looked into whether the implementation of criminal Shari'a (Islamic law) by 12 Northern states over the last two years affected the freedom of non-Muslims to practice their religions. This generally did not appear to be the case. The team even discovered that some Christians in Zamfara State are assisting in the implementation of Shari'a. Because the Christian community is so small (barely three percent of the population), it feels vulnerable to sexual segregation restrictions imposed by the majority. Therefore, the Christian groups say they have "taken it upon themselves" to ensure that Muslims are complying, and, at the same time, turn a profit. For example, they have accosted local male motorbike taxi service drivers whenever they observe Muslim women being ferried. They give the riders two choices: they can either pay a "fine" to the Christian organization or be escorted to the local branch of the Shari'a enforcement committee. The Christians enjoys a steady subsidy, according to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) chairman in the state.

110. Shari'a implementation has, however, raised other human rights issues. Most NGO's and lawyers agreed that these states' Shari'a enforcement is capricious, depending on the whims of the local courts. The Solicitor-General confirmed that while state-level Shari'a court judges have to meet strict criteria for their qualifications, at the local level there are no serious standards. Among the problems are denial of access to counsel, different standards for men and women giving evidence, and not adhering the Shari'a-required number of witnesses in order to prosecute. Surprisingly, the team learned that apostasy is not currently part of the penal code in any of the Northern states that have adopted Shari'a.

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EMBASSY OUTREACH  
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110. The CIRF delegation departed Nigeria encouraging that the Embassy monitor and support inter-faith organizations like NIREC (the national Nigerian Inter-Religious Council) and the Interfaith Mediation Center in Kaduna. Many of the delegation's interlocutors actually asked that the Embassy put pressure on the GON to push NIREC to expand to the state and local levels. Although the Ulema Council in Kano was antagonistic toward the USG, as well as to inter-faith dialogue, the delegation thought that it would appreciate more contact with the Embassy and that more contact might

lead to dialogue. The team expressed concern, however, that the USG maintained no consulate presence in northern Nigeria (since the closing of the Kaduna Consulate in 1995). They also urged expansion of the VOA Hausa broadcast service, to address northerners for whom radio is a major influence.

ROBERTS